

Tim and the Hidden People

Tim Rides on the Ghost Bus

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Pat Cook



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Tim stood on the sands, in the Cove of the Dark Tower, watching Grandfather Strome. Grandfather Strome stood leaning against his boat, and listening to Nicola and Jeremy, as they poured out the story of all that had happened to them since they had seen him years before. Grandfather Strome stood smiling down at them, and Tim could see how happy he was that the children were safely with him.

Nicola was just coming to the end of the story, when Grandfather looked across and saw Tim.

"Wait, Nicola," he said. "Wait a moment. There's a friend of yours here, and I haven't met him yet."

He came over to Tim.

"The children wouldn't be here, if it hadn't been for you, Tim," he said. "Will you come with us to the island? You will be very welcome there." Grandfather Strome smiled, and Tim thought of Mr. Berryman. Mr. Berryman sometimes smiled at him like that.

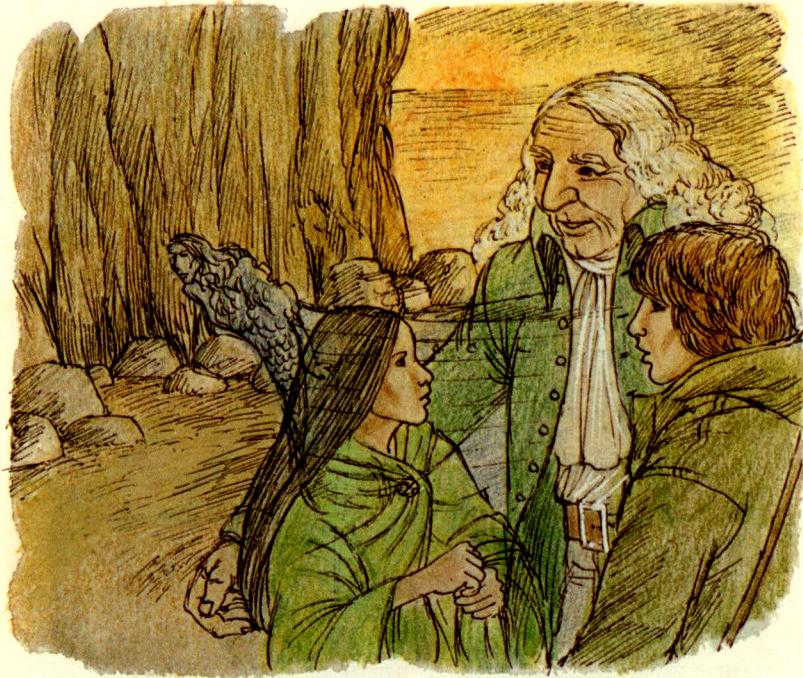
"I think—I think I'd better go back," Tim said slowly. "You see—I'm just one of the Ordinary Folk. And I keep wondering what's happening in The Yard. I want to go back and see how everyone is."

"Oh, Tim," cried Nicola, running over to them. "You *must* come with us to the island! Please, Tim. Do come."

Tim shook his head. "I can't, Nicola," he said. "I might later on. But I must go back now."

"But Tim—" began Nicola.

Grandfather Strome put his hand on Nicola's shoulder.



"Let the boy do what he thinks is right, Nicola," he said. "He knows we should be glad to have him, but he must make up his own mind. It isn't easy for the Ordinary Folk to live with the Hidden People."

"I must go back," said Tim.

Grandfather Strome nodded. "If you ever want to come and see us, Tim, light three fires on the Dark Tower, and the boat will come for you," he said. "I shall never forget what you've done. The wind witches would have taken Nicola and Jeremy by this time, if it hadn't been for you."

"I'll come and see you some day," said Tim.

"You will always be welcome," said Grandfather Strome. "And now—how are you going to get home?"
"I have to get back to the road," said Tim. "And then I'll catch the Ghost Bus, and go as far south on that as I can. Then I'll hitch-hike the rest of the way—or walk, if I have to."

Grandfather Strome nodded. "And how are you going to the road?" he asked.

"I'll walk over the moor," said Tim.

Grandfather Strome looked at the sky. "You haven't time, if you want to catch the Ghost Bus tonight," he said. "It will soon be dark. I see you've got a cat with you. Can he fly a broomstick?"

"Yes," said Tim. "He's one of the Strange Ones."

"Then I've a broom that will take you back to the road," said Grandfather Strome. "Don't try to fly farther south on it. The wind witches will be out, and Mandrake will be looking for you. You'll be safer on the bus. The driver doesn't take witches."

He turned to the children.

"Come, Nicola," he said. He lifted her up and over the side of the boat. "Now Jeremy." He lifted Jeremy after her, and then climbed up into the boat himself. He bent down, picked up a broomstick, and tossed it down on to the sand. Sebastian ran over to it.

"There you are, Tim," called Grandfather Strome.
"Fly on that back to the road."

"How shall I know that you get to the island?" cried Tim. "I must know that you get there safely."

"We'll send you a white owl's feather," called Grandfather Strome. "When you get the feather, you'll know we're on the island."

He lifted his hand. The legs which were holding the boat slipped back. The boat ran back down the sand and into the sea.

"Goodbye, Tim," shouted Jeremy.

Nicola ran to the back of the boat.

"Goodbye, Tim. Goodbye!" she cried. "Come and see us soon, Tim. We'll never forget you."

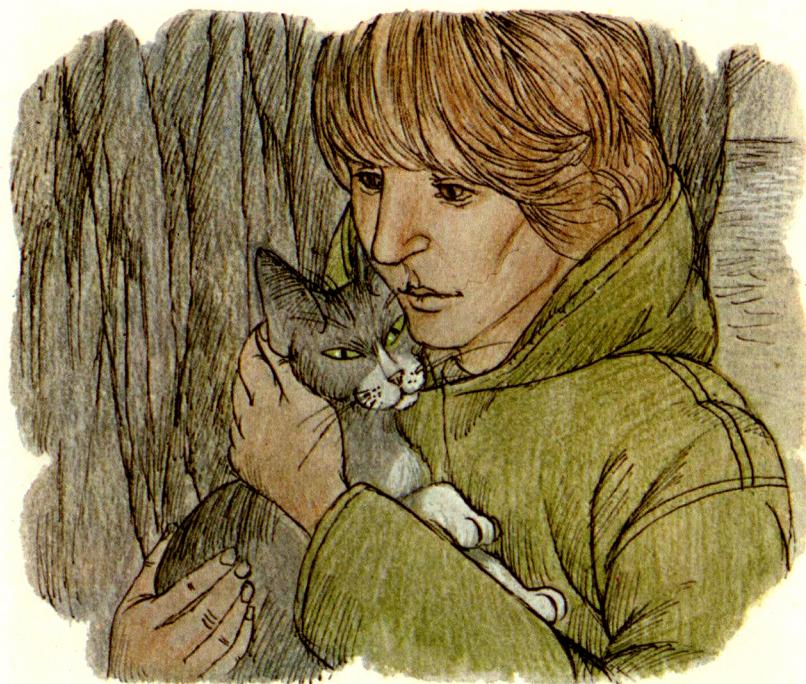
"I will," Tim called back. "I'll come one day. Don't forget to send the feather."

"We'll send it," cried Nicola.

Tim stood on the sands, looking across the sea, as the boat ran out of the bay. He watched it grow smaller and smaller, until he couldn't see it any longer.

It was quite dark now, but the moon was rising behind him, and the night was full of stars. A puff of wind blew down on him, from the north. Tim shivered. He had often felt lonely, but he had never felt quite so lonely as he did now, listening to the waves breaking, and looking out over the empty sea.





There was a little purr at his feet, and something soft and warm pressed against Tim's leg.

"Sebastian!" said Tim, looking down. "Good old Sebastian! I thought you might go off to the island with the rest of them. I might have known you'd stay here with me."

Sebastian purred loudly. Tim bent down and picked him up. Sebastian pushed his head under Tim's chin.

"Good old Sebastian!" Tim said again. "Well - do you think we should be going? We mustn't miss that bus."



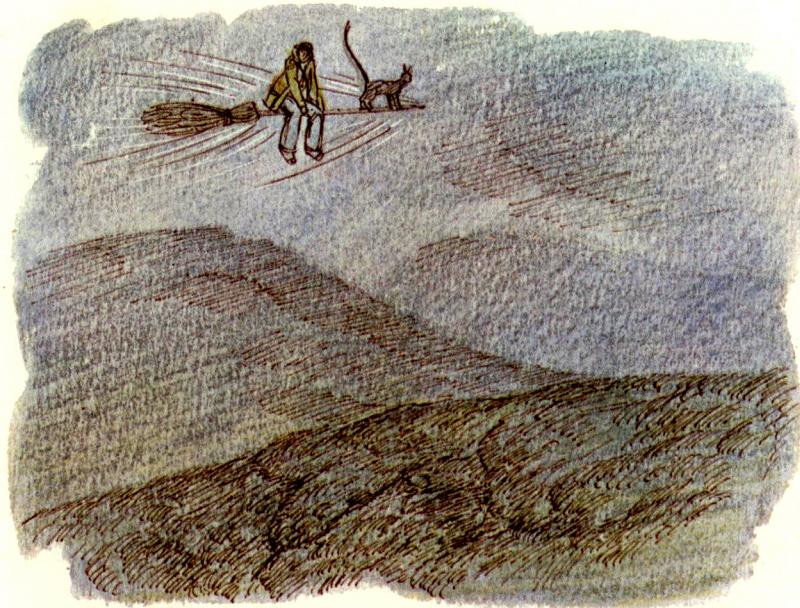
Sebastian jumped out of his arms, and ran over to the broomstick. He twitched his tail, and the broomstick lifted two feet off the sand, and floated in the air. Sebastian might not be able to fight the stump people, but he could fly a broomstick when he wanted to. He jumped on to one end of it, and stood there, looking at Tim. Sebastian was ready to go.

Tim took a last look at the sea, and then sat down on the broomstick, and gripped it with his hands. Sebastian twitched his tail, and the broomstick flew up into the air. Higher and higher they went, until they cleared the top of the cliffs, and flew over the moor towards the rising moon.



Tim looked down. There was the top of the Dark Tower, where he had had to fight the stump people. He put one hand up and felt the silver chain around his neck. He felt much safer, knowing that the silver coin was there. He looked down at his chest, and found that he couldn't see the silver coin through his clothes.

"Of course, I'm not invisible any more," he thought. "Well, there's no one here to see me. But I'll have to take some of that stuff Melinda gave me, before I catch the Ghost Bus."



The broomstick was flying inland, away from the sea. Tim could feel the wind blowing much more strongly, now that they were out of the shelter of the cliffs. But the wind was blowing from the north, so that he felt quite safe. The wind witches were far to the south of him, and they needed a south wind before they could fly to the Dark Tower.

He looked at the country below him. He could see hills and moorland, and great rocks sticking up here and there in the moonlight. It looked dark and wild and lonely, and he was glad when at last he saw the lights of a car, running along a road.

The broomstick began to come down.

They landed on the road itself. Sebastian jumped off the broomstick with a little purr, but Tim fell off on to the ground with a bang. Sebastian wasn't very good at soft landings, and this was a very hard one. Tim wasn't hurt, but he felt a bit shaken. He picked himself up, and looked around.

There were no houses and no cars. There was no sign of anyone at all. The road disappeared into the darkness of the moor.

Tim picked up the broomstick and tossed it into the heather. He sat down on a stone to wait.

"You can make yourself invisible when you want to, can't you, Sebastian?" he asked, as the little cat sat down by his foot. Sebastian purred, and rubbed himself against Tim's leg.

"Well, you'd better," said Tim. "We must be ready by the time the bus comes."

He put his hand into his pocket, and felt for Melinda's bottle. His pocket was all wet and sticky. His fingers found the bottle, and pulled it out. The cap had come off, and the bottle was nearly empty!

Tim stared at it for a moment. The cap must have shaken off when he fell on the road. He took the bottle in his other hand, and felt in his sticky pocket again. Yes. There was the cap. He pulled it out.

"What am I going to do now?" he asked aloud.

Sebastian stood up on his back legs, and put his front paws on Tim's knees.

"Rrrrrrr?" he asked.



Tim held the bottle up in the moonlight, and tilted it.
There was just a little left in the bottom.

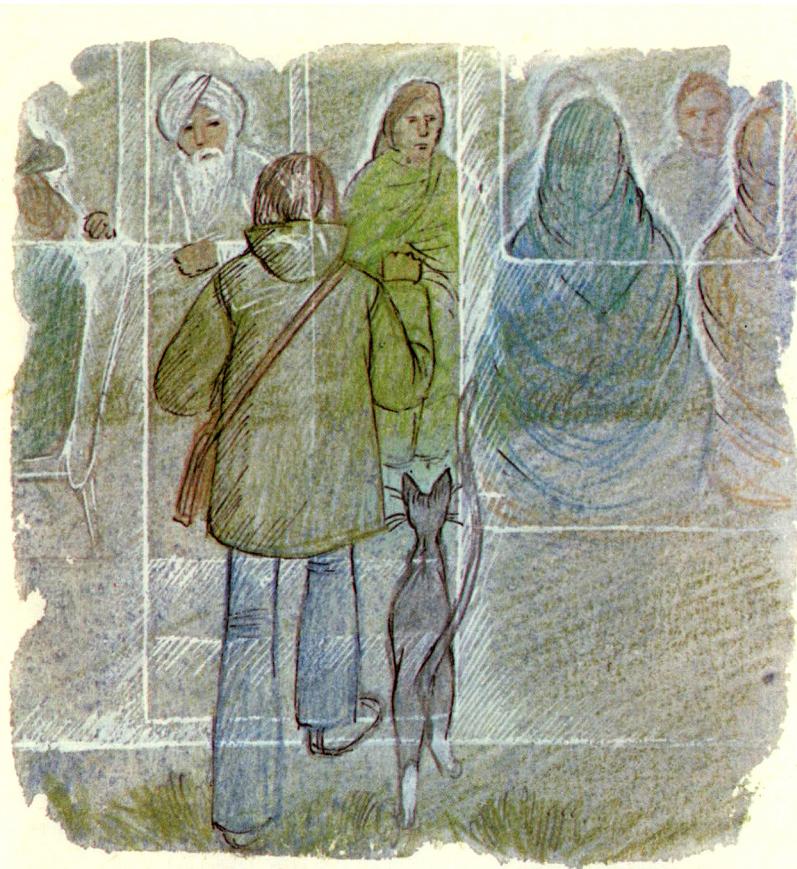
"That will take me some of the way, anyhow," said
Tim. "I wonder how many drops there are."



Sebastian mewed loudly.

Tim looked up.

A big white bus was coming along the road. The moon was shining down on it, and Tim knew at once what it was. He poured everything that was left in the bottle into the cap, and drank it. He put the cap back, and pushed the bottle into his pocket again. He looked down. He could see the silver coin shining brightly through his clothes. He stood up, and held up his hand for the bus. He was ready.



The bus slowed down and stopped in front of him. It was a silvery white, and Tim found that he could see through it – he could just make out the dark moor on the other side of the road, as if the bus had been made of some kind of white glass. The door opened, and he got in. Sebastian jumped in after him, and the door closed behind them.



The driver was dressed in white. He wore a white turban, and a loose white tunic, with loose red trousers and strange-looking gold shoes, which turned up at the toes. His face looked as if it were made of glass, like the bus, and he had a long white beard. He had dark eyes, and he looked Tim up and down for a minute. Then he smiled.

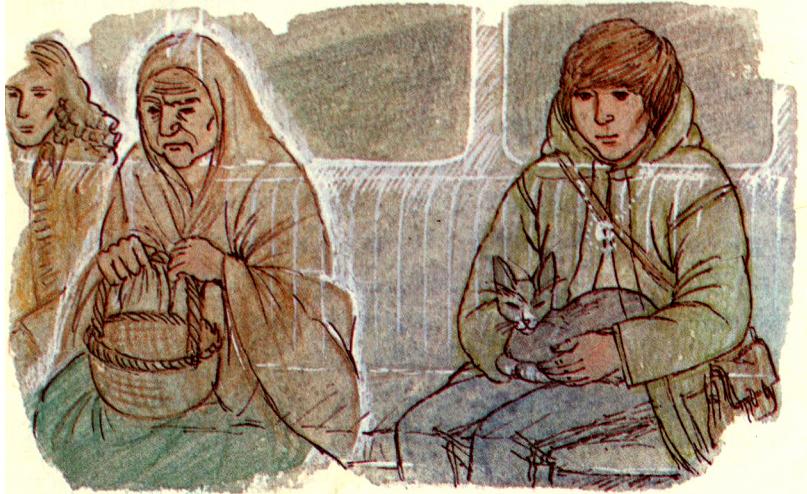
“Can – can I come with you?” asked Tim.

The driver nodded his head. He said nothing, but when Tim still didn’t move, he jerked his head towards the back and started the bus moving again.

Tim looked for somewhere to sit down. The bus was full of Hidden People, but they looked quite friendly. There was only one seat facing forwards, and that was beside the driver. Someone was already sitting there. He didn't turn round, and all Tim could see of him was a greenish-white coat, with a big cape, and a black, three-cornered hat.

Everyone else was sitting on two long bench seats, which ran down each side of the bus to a door at the back. The seats were nearly full, but there was a space at the far end, near the back door.

Tim made his way down to it. He sat down in the corner, leaning against the end of the bus. Sebastian jumped on to his knees. Tim settled himself back, and looked at the other passengers.



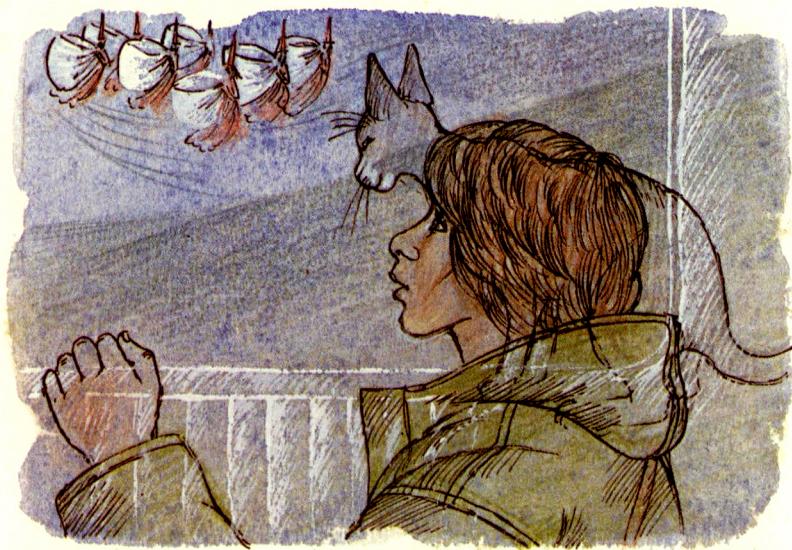
There was no light inside the bus, but all the passengers seemed to have a white light shining around them. Their clothes were of different colours, and yet they all looked strangely white. Tim remembered Jack. Jack had looked just like that, when he had frightened the two people on the canal path, a year ago.

Nobody seemed to think that Tim looked strange. There were two sailors opposite him, with long hair, tied back in pig-tails. Next to them sat an old man in a top hat. He had a long white beard, just like the driver. Next to him was an old woman, with a shawl over her head. A boy was sitting beside her, wearing an odd sort of coat, and long stockings. The boy was the only one looking at Tim. He saw Tim look at him, and made a face at him.

Tim grinned back. That made him feel better. There was a space on his right, and then there was an old woman with a basket. There were other people farther down the bus. They were all Hidden People, but they took no notice of Tim.

Sebastian had settled himself down, and was purring softly. Tim wondered if he should stay awake, but he was very tired after the fight with the stump people, and the long climb down the cliffs. He leaned back into the corner, shut his eyes, and fell asleep.





Tim felt something sharp digging into his shoulder. He woke up, to find Sebastian standing on it, holding on with his claws, and staring out of the window.

Tim turned, and stared out into the night. He gave a little gasp. Up there, against the starlit sky, the wind witches were riding the wind. There were seven of them. Their silver cloaks were blowing out in front of them like sails, and their dark red skirts blew all around them. The bus rushed forwards without a sound, but Tim could hear the wind blowing outside. For a moment, he felt frightened. He was afraid the witches were looking for him. But then he saw that they were flying too high to be looking for anyone. They were flying home on the north wind.



Tim watched the witches, until he couldn't see them any longer. The bus was travelling faster than they were. It seemed to be almost flying over the road, much faster than any ordinary bus could have travelled. Tim was glad when they left the witches behind. Sebastian settled down again to sleep on his knees, but it was a long time before Tim could get back to sleep. But he was very tired, and at last he fell asleep again, leaning against the corner of the bus.

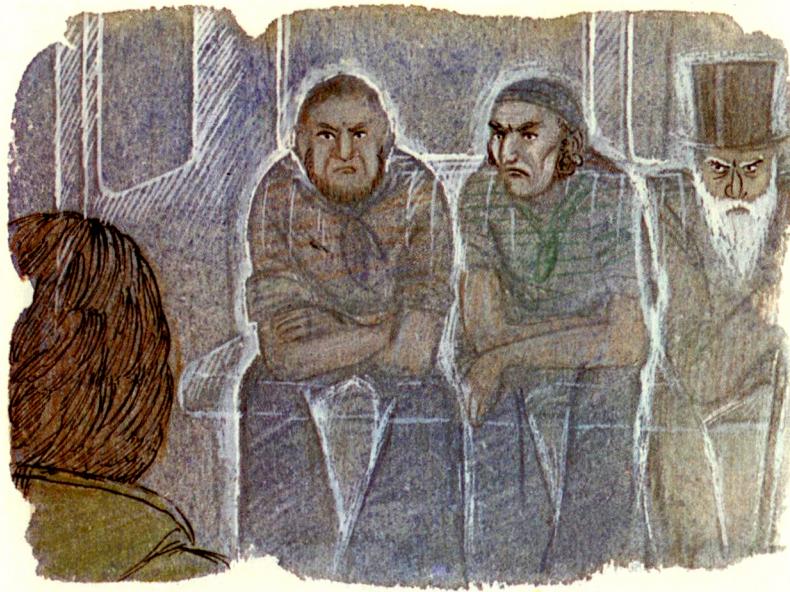
He slept for a long time. He opened his eyes now and then, when the bus stopped and someone got off, or someone got on. But he went back to sleep again as soon as the bus started.



The bus seemed to be travelling faster and faster. When he woke up again, he saw that they had left the hills and moors behind them, and were on a main road. He could see the cars and lorries of the Ordinary Folk rushing by. When he woke the next time, they were on the motorway, travelling south.

Tim knew he must be in England again. He wondered what the time was, and wondered if he could ask someone. But that didn't seem to be the right thing to do at all.

He shut his eyes, and went back to sleep.



An hour later, Tim woke up with a start. For a moment, he wondered what had woken him. Then he felt Sebastian's claws digging into his knee. He looked up, and saw the other passengers.

All the other passengers were staring at him. They didn't look friendly any more. Their eyes were glowing in their white faces, and for the first time, Tim felt frightened of them. He stared back at them.

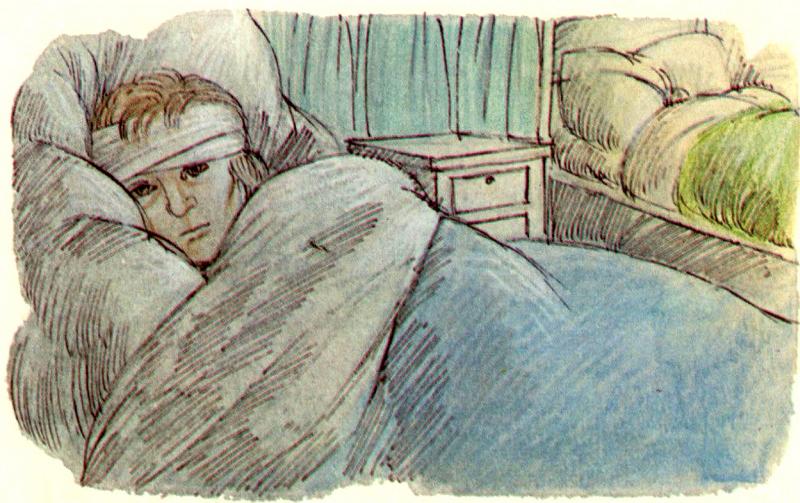
Then, suddenly, he remembered that he hadn't drunk much from Melinda's bottle. He looked down at his chest. He couldn't see the silver coin. There was still a faint silvery glow, but it was almost hidden by his clothes. He was no longer invisible.



Tim looked up quickly. The man in the three-cornered hat had got to his feet, and was staring back down the bus towards him. Other passengers were getting up too. Their eyes were on Tim, and they looked angry. Tim felt so frightened, that he couldn't move.

There was a sudden blaze of yellow light through the back window of the bus. It was followed by a squeal of brakes, as a car behind the bus tried to swing to one side. For a moment, the bus seemed full of yellow light. Then there was a great crash.

The Hidden People, the ghost bus, the lights—everything vanished before Tim's eyes, and he felt himself falling, falling, falling into the darkness.



Tim slowly opened his eyes.

“Where am I?” he whispered.

He was somewhere where the light was very dim. He was lying on something soft, and his head was aching. He tried to remember what had happened, but he couldn’t remember anything at all.

He would have been comfortable, if it hadn’t been for his head. But his head ached so much, that it had woken him up.

He lifted his head a little, to see where he was. He was lying in a bed, in a long, dark room. There was a dim light at one end, and he could see that there were other beds in the room, with other people in them. But when he tried to look at them, his head ached more and more, so he shut his eyes again, and went back to sleep.



When he next opened his eyes, it was daylight, and Aunt May was sitting by his bed, looking at him. For a moment, he thought he must be dreaming. But Aunt May got up, and came over to the bed.

"Tim?" she said. "Tim? Are you awake?"

"Yes," whispered Tim. "Where am I?"

"In hospital," said Aunt May.

"What happened?" asked Tim.

"You were hit by a car," said Aunt May. "You were sitting in the middle of the motorway. I don't know how you got there. Oh, Tim, you didn't have to run away. I'd have got rid of Miss Miff then and there, if I'd known what you were going to do. She's gone now, Tim. She doesn't live in the house any more. I sent her packing, when I found you'd gone. But don't you worry. We've got someone else. She's a friend of Mr. Berryman's and you'll like her. She's ever so nice."

"Mr. Berryman told me to tell you not to worry about Jim and Kevin, too. Jim's been in trouble with the police, and they've gone to live somewhere else."

"Oh Tim - I'm so glad you're back. You shouldn't have run off like that."

Aunt May dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief.

Tim smiled at her. "I'm glad I came back," he said.

A nurse came down the ward.

"I think you'd better go now," she said softly to Aunt May. "Let him go back to sleep. He mustn't talk."

"Goodbye, Tim," whispered Aunt May. "I'll come back tomorrow."

She went off down the ward.

"Can I have a drink?" asked Tim.

"I'll get you some water," said the nurse.

She came back with a glass of water. She put her fingers on his wrist while he drank it.

"You go back to sleep, Tim," she said, when he'd finished. "You'll feel much better soon."



When Tim woke up again, it was evening. His head felt much better, and he was feeling hungry. When the doctor came round, Tim asked him if he could have something to eat. He was only allowed to have a glass of milk, but even that made him feel stronger.

He began to think about what had happened. He remembered everything now, up to the point when something crashed into the back of the ghost bus. Or had it crashed into him? Tim didn't know.

They must have found him on the road, and taken him to hospital. He wondered how they knew who he was. Then he remembered that the police had been looking for him anyway.

He suddenly thought of Sebastian, and sat up quickly. That sent a sharp pain through his head, so he lay slowly down again, and stared upwards.

What had happened to Sebastian? No one would bother about a little grey cat.

He thought of Melinda. Melinda might know what had happened to Sebastian. He put his hand up to his neck, to touch the silver chain. The silver chain wasn't there any longer. Both the coin and the chain had gone.

His hand dropped to his side. That was the end of it, then. He'd never find Sebastian, without Melinda. He'd never go to the island. He wouldn't be able to see Nicola and Jeremy, even if he did.

The nurse came down the ward.

"Hallo, Tim," she said. "How are you feeling? You're looking a bit unhappy."

"I'm all right," said Tim.

"Well, I wouldn't go as far as to say that," said the nurse. "But you'll be all right in a day or two. Don't worry about your things. They're all in the little drawer of this cupboard by your bed. Your aunt took your clothes home to wash them."

She smiled at him, and went on down the ward.

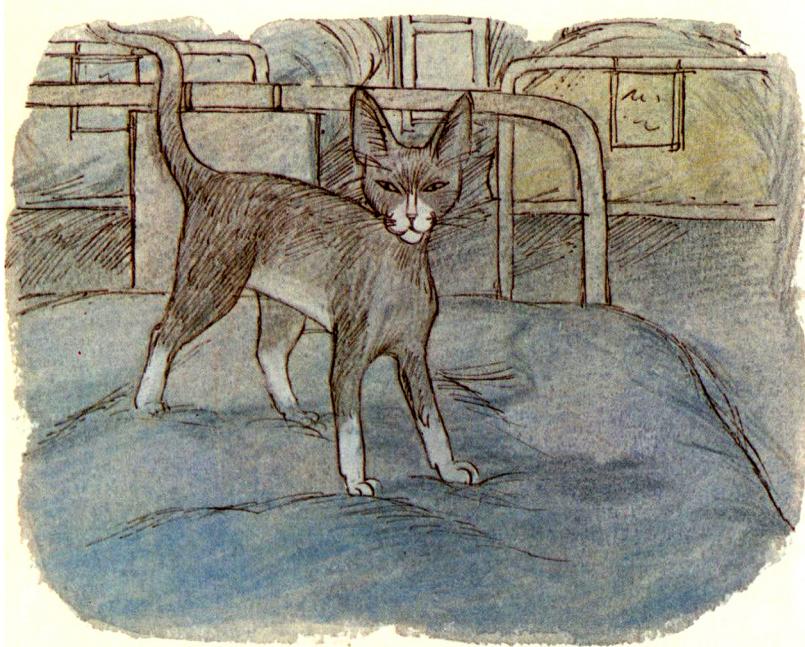
Tim leant over and opened the drawer in the little cupboard. He put his hand in, and felt about. His fingers touched something hard. He pulled it out.



It was the long silver chain, with Melinda's coin on the end of it.

Tim pushed the drawer in, and hung the chain round his neck. At least he'd be able to find out how everyone was. He could go and see Melinda when he was well.

He settled down on the pillow, and went back to sleep.



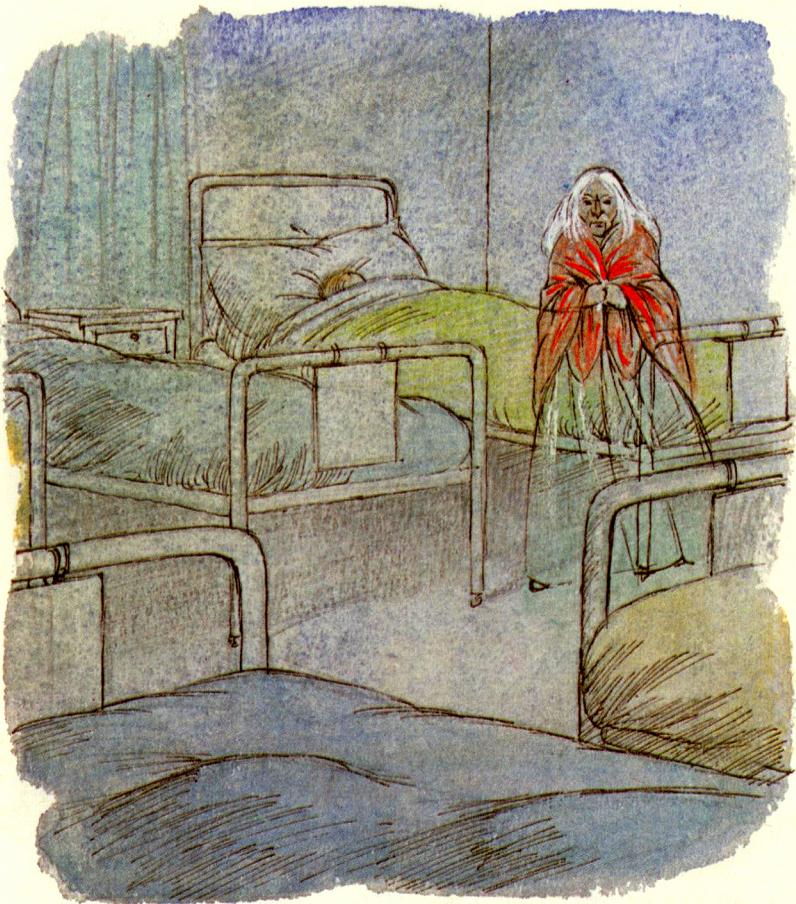
When he woke up again, it was night. There was a dim light in the ward, and everyone else was sleeping.

Something had woken him, and Tim wondered what it was. Then he heard a loud purr, and looked down, to see Sebastian standing on the end of his bed.

"Sebastian!" said Tim. "I'm *so* glad to see you. I thought you'd been hurt."

Sebastian stepped on to Tim's feet, and walked all the way up his legs, on to his chest. He was purring so loudly that Tim was afraid he might wake someone up.

Tim stroked him, and Sebastian purred louder than ever.



Someone came through the door at the end of the ward. Tim looked up, and saw Melinda. Melinda herself was walking slowly along the ward towards him. She was wearing her old green dress, with the red shawl, just as she always did.

Melinda sat down in the chair, where Aunt May had been sitting a few hours ago, and smiled at him.

"Well, Tim," she said. "I've got something for you."

Tim picked it up. It was a big white feather.

"Is it an owl's feather?" he asked. "Are they all on the island?"

Melinda nodded. "They're all safe," she said. "All because of you, Tim."

"I'm glad they're there," Tim said. "I was afraid something might happen, even after we met Grandfather Strome."

"Nicola and Jeremy will be safe with Grandfather Strome," said Melinda. "There's nothing to worry about now. Go and see them one day, Tim."

She got up.

"I only came to bring the feather, and to thank you, Tim," she said. "I'll go now. You must get some sleep."

Melinda sounded almost like Aunt May.

"Your friend Arun is back in The Yard," she said. "And Sebastian is going to move in and live with you, now that Miss Miff has gone."

Tim put out his hand, and Sebastian rubbed his head against it.

"Goodbye, Tim," said Melinda. "Come and see me whenever you like. And one day you must go to the island."

"I will," said Tim.

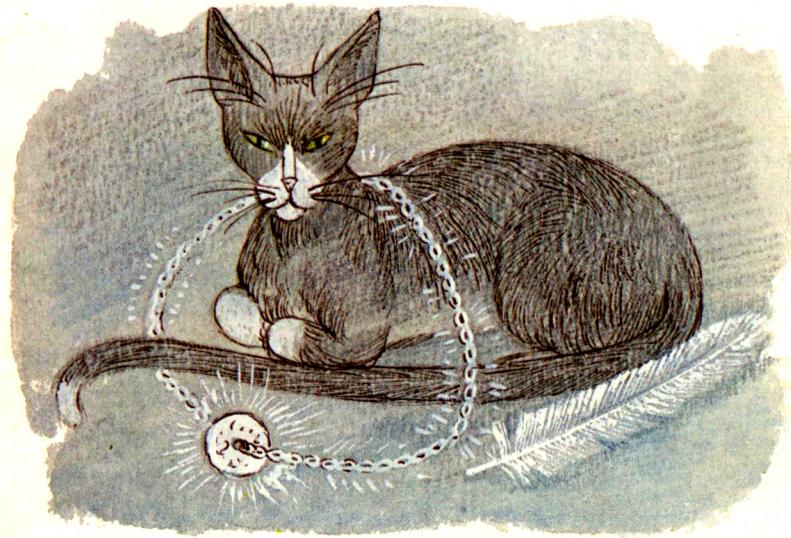
Melinda stood up. Tim watched her walk slowly down the ward, and through the far door.

Then he settled himself down again, and shut his eyes. He'd soon be back in The Yard. Arun was back now, and Sebastian was coming to live with him. He'd see Mr. Berryman, and Miss Baker. Miss Miff had gone, and Aunt May was really glad to have him back. He was glad to see her, too.

Sebastian was still on the end of his bed.

"You'll have to make yourself invisible, Sebastian," he whispered. "They don't like cats in hospitals."

Sebastian settled down by his feet, still purring, and Tim went back to sleep.



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